



## Creating the Framework for Your Fire Corps Program

This document will provide guidance on how to create a program, how to assess your needs and the needs of your community, and how to address the logistical issues associated with making non-emergency volunteers part of your team. In addition to departments starting new programs, there are departments that already have non-emergency volunteers or community outreach programs in place. For them, this section should be used as a review to identify how existing programs are working and where improvements can be made.

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## Assess Your Needs

The first step in establishing a Fire Corps program is to assess the needs of the department and the ability of the members of the department and the community at large to support the program. Once that is complete, this information should be incorporated into the mission, goals, and objectives of your Fire Corps program.

These assessed needs should include non-critical supplemental tasks that may overburden firefighters and EMTs and could be performed by nonemergency volunteers. It is important to recognize the areas in which your department needs help, rank them by importance, and then create or modify your programs to meet the needs at the top of the list.

Remember that the purpose of engaging the community is to supplement and support, not supplant current employees or members. If you replace a paid employee or remove a long-term dedicated volunteer with someone new, you may end up with employees and members who do not welcome the new Fire Corps members as well as new Fire Corps members who do not feel valued. You should also view Fire Corps members who join your as part of the team so that they feel they are a part of the emergency services “family” at a level in which they can commit.

## Assess Your Department and Community Characteristics

The characteristics of your department and your community influence the need for, acceptance of, and availability of residents willing to help. You may consider including community members or organizations in the program development process. Factors to consider include department size and type, community size, community demographics, such as the age and transient nature of the population, the presence of philanthropic organizations or other possible supporters, as well as existing sources of volunteers such as higher education institutions or volunteer centers.

You should also address employee and member concerns about the addition of Fire Corps members into the department. These discussions should involve labor groups, department members, including existing administrative or support members, and civilian employees. If these groups are involved from the beginning, it will help your department convey the message that the community is there to assist members, not replace them. As a result, the volunteers may be better accepted when they arrive.

## Define Fire Corps Roles

It is important to have predefined roles that Fire Corps volunteers can fill, thus setting expectations for both the volunteer and the department members. The roles that non-emergency members can perform are endless and in many cases are driven by local needs, such as preparing the public for wildland fire season, developing hurricane evacuation pre-plans in coastal regions, or helping to create street pre-plans in rapidly expanding towns.

Below are examples of position descriptions that could be performed by Fire Corps volunteers. This list is by no means complete as there are an infinite number of roles that these individuals can fulfill. Remember, these roles are not intended to replace paid positions within the department. Rather, they are intended to help departments fulfill unmet needs and increase the level of service provided to the community.

### CATEGORY: ADMINISTRATION

Title: Program Coordinator - coordinates the recruitment, selection, and assignments of other volunteers within the volunteer program; may support multiple areas and categories. *Qualifications:* Experience in supervision and/or management of people; multi-tasker; highly developed skills in problem resolution; adaptable to change; basic computer skills.

Title: Office Assistant – assists with answering phones, front desk customer service, filing, word processing, and general office duties. *Qualifications:* Good phone and communication skills, quick learner, basic computer skills.

Title: Grant Writer – searches for grants, writes grant applications, and assists with grant management. *Qualifications:* Related work experience; good writing skills.

Title: Fundraising Coordinator – assists with scheduling, promotion, organization, and direction of fundraising activities. *Qualifications:* Marketing/advertising skills and experience; outgoing, affable personality; organized and can work unsupervised; good communication skills; self-starter.

Title: Archivist – compiles photos, news clippings, video, audio, historical, and other items and archives in binders, storage facilities, data files, etc. *Qualifications:* Good organizational skills and ability to use computer databases.

Title: Fire Historian – researches history of fire service and fire service operations in the community; may develop displays for museums or fire stations of a historical nature; gathers information and display materials of historical significance. *Qualifications:* Able to conduct research and prepare documentation of fire service history.

Title: Fire Museum Docent – assists with the establishment of displays at public museums; describes historical fire operations and uses of equipment on display. *Qualifications:* Good public speaking skills; familiarity with historical operations; ability to describe operations and equipment; outgoing personality.

#### CATEGORY: OUTREACH

Title: Social Media Manager - plans, implements, manages, curates content for, and monitors the department's social media accounts. *Qualifications:* Excellent verbal and written communication skills, proficient in top-use social media platforms and analytics, strong time management skills.

Title: Information Technology Specialist – assists with computer systems set-up, diagnosis and repair, web site set-up and maintenance. *Qualifications:* Knowledge of networks, Internet, and any combination of education and experience that would provide the knowledge and skills necessary to carry out the above duties.

Title: Newsletter Editor – writes articles and develops newsletters for the community and/or department staff. *Qualifications:* Ability to communicate effectively both verbally and in writing; good computer skills.

Title: Photographer/Videographer – photographs/videos special events, department events, and emergency incidents. Note: Can support multiple areas/categories. *Qualifications:* Must have access to appropriate equipment and knowledge of digital camera and/or video and various lenses (supplies may be provided by the department).

Title: Public Relations Coordinator – assists with outreach and recruiting additional Fire Corps members; may support multiple areas and categories. *Qualifications:* Organized and can work unsupervised; good communication skills; professional in appearance and approach; problem solver; sensitive to a diverse community with diverse issues; self-starter.

Title: Special Events Coordinator – schedules, promotes, organizes, and directs special events. *Qualifications:* Organized and can work unsupervised; good communication skills; self-starter.

## CATEGORY: ACTIVITY SPECIFIC SUPPORT SERVICES

Title: Fire Prevention Coordinator – develops fire prevention program for the department along with an implementation plan. *Qualifications:* Experience in teaching, lesson plan creation, and knowledge of standard office software applications such as Word, Excel, and Access.

Title: Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) – provides CISM counseling to department members following significant incidents. *Qualifications:* Must be licensed mental health professional with background or coursework in CISM or may be chaplain with coursework in CISM.

Title: Crisis Intervention Specialist Provides crisis intervention and counseling to community members during and following significant incidents. *Qualifications:* Applicable para-professional training in crisis intervention.

Title: Geographic Information Systems (GIS) Administrative Support – prepares GIS mapping and pre-plan documents and distribution; maintains map books for engine companies/Operations Division; tracks fire inspection workload and pre-fire planning; inputs information into GIS data systems. *Qualifications:* Knowledge of Computer Aided Drawing (CAD); experience with GPS devices and GIS.

Title: Wildfire Mitigator (Urban-Wildland Interface) – assists with the conduction of inspections private residences to ensure adequate fire clearances in the urban-wildland interface areas. *Qualifications:* Knowledge of local fire code and ordinances; customer service skills; valid driver’s license; good driving record.

Title: Translator/Interpreter Assists department responders in communicating with non-English speaking residents during emergency incidents; promotes public safety and fire prevention; outreach. *Qualifications:* Bilingual; good communication skills; ability to handle high-stress situations.

Title: Responder Rehabilitator – provides support to medical unit leader in the deployment and operation of the rehab facility; may perform certain tasks within the facility if trained; assists with set-up and break-down of facility. *Qualifications:* Knowledge of operating principles of a rehab facility; experience with delivery of emergency medical services is helpful.

## CATEGORY: TRAINING

Title: Adjunct Faculty Assists in the delivery of specific subject matter based on the individual’s area of expertise. *Qualifications:* Knowledge of adult learning concepts; instructional design and/or delivery experience; subject-matter expertise.

Title: Audio/Visual Support Technician Assists the training officer, guest instructors, lecturers, and presenters with setting up multimedia presentations and videos. *Qualifications:* Knowledge of computers and presentation software; ability to interface computers with P/C projector, audio systems, and VCR and/or DVD players; ability to develop slide presentations such as PowerPoint and add graphics, photographs, video clips, documents, and maps to enhance the presentation.

Title: Course Support Specialist Assists in the scheduling of departmental training activities; maintains training “master” calendar; schedules training classrooms and drill grounds. *Qualifications:* Ability to use personal computers and standard software applications such as Word, Access, and Excel.

Title: Department Librarian Catalogs and maintains inventory of training materials such as textbooks, magazines, training manuals, instructional materials, and other media. *Qualifications:* Use of personal computers and database programs; ability to communicate effectively, both verbally and in writing; ability to categorize and supervise storage.

Title: E-Learning Specialist Assists with the development and delivery of online learning programs; web site development; interacts with various divisions to ascertain appropriate information to place on the Internet. *Qualifications:* Above average knowledge of computer systems, online learning design, and delivery methodologies pertaining to the Internet and HTML.

Title: Fire/EMS Training Role Player Assists the Training Officer in providing training to department personnel and the public as a role player. *Qualifications:* Outgoing personality; available to work various hours of the day.

Title: Records Management Specialist Assists in the maintenance of training records. *Qualifications:* Ability to use personal computers and standard software applications such as Word, Access, Excel, and others; good organizational skills.

### **Selecting Fire Corps Volunteers**

The selection of non-emergency volunteers has become complicated in today's world. It is important for every department to screen individuals before bringing them on board as part of their department. The level of screening will depend on department policies and the role of the volunteer. Individuals with access to confidential information or department equipment may require more intensive screening.

All applicants should be asked to complete an application form. They should provide contact information, an emergency contact, and references. Applicants should also detail their skills, experience, and availability. You may also choose to provide a cover letter or informational brochure about your Fire Corps program to explain the department's expectations and the opportunities offered. Visit the [Sample and Customizable Documents](#) page to find templates and program examples of volunteer applications, policies and procedures, roles and responsibilities, and more.

If you are considering accepting the applicant into the program, the Fire Corps coordinator or other department representative should arrange to interview the candidate. The interview should assist in determining if the prospective candidate is a good fit for your department. In addition to an application and the interview, you may consider additional screening including:

- criminal background check
- online screening
- reference check
- fingerprinting
- drug testing

Some departments may choose to complete some or all of these steps before conducting an interview. In this event, the information required to complete the screening(s) should be requested in the volunteer application.

Selection is critical. Regardless of the function the person is serving, his or her actions, on and off duty, will reflect on the department. The person's friends and neighbors and the community at large may not distinguish between a firefighter or EMT and a Fire Corps volunteer.

Once a community member has been accepted, you may choose to send a letter welcoming him or her to the department. A letter signed by the chief, fire commissioner, or company president can convey the department's appreciation and serve as the first step in cultivating a long-term relationship with an individual that is donating his or her time and talents to your department.

### **Declining Fire Corps Volunteers**

Each department must develop criteria for screening and selection before establishing a Fire Corps program. The specific criteria will vary from one department to another. While you may have certain universal criteria, such as no felony convictions, other criteria may depend on the activities the member will be engaged in, such as driving a departmental vehicle or conducting public education in local schools. Making potential members aware of these selection criteria at the outset may prevent unqualified individuals from applying. It is also useful to have established criteria to refer to if an individual complains about not being selected. If you have a multidimensional program, an individual who is inappropriate for one role may be a good fit for another role within the department.

### **Liability**

Fire Corps programs offer substantial benefits to a department and its Fire Corps members, but, like all department activities, can produce unexpected results - events that are not planned outcomes of the activity. Unexpected results include volunteer injury as well as harm to others caused by a department's or a volunteer's wrongful act or failure to act with reasonable care. The potential consequences include liability to compensate victims under state law. For the liable person or organization, this can mean loss of financial and other resources, as well as damage to partnerships and reputation in the community.

Concern about these consequences, especially the department's potential liability for injury to a volunteer or a member of the public, is a barrier that discourages some departments from starting a Fire Corps program. Members of the public often have similar concerns and consequently are unwilling to volunteer if the department does not offer liability protection and injury benefits. These barriers are best addressed directly and early in the process of organizing a Fire Corps program, by adopting a plan to minimize liability and to pay for liability that does occur.

Fire Corps created the [Fire Corps Liability Guide: Managing the Unexpected in Fire Corps Activities](#) to help your department address liability issues within your Fire Corps program.

### **Budgeting/Funding**

Establishing and maintaining a Fire Corps program is not a cost-free endeavor; however, the added value of such a program can be substantial. For a combination or volunteer department that already has volunteers, the program support costs can be minimal. The mechanisms to manage the new members of your team are already in place, and many career departments may already have community outreach programs of which Fire Corps can become an extension.

The costs associated with establishing and maintaining a Fire Corps program will vary depending on the scope of opportunities you offer. Remember that you are greatly adding to the value of your department. Costs to consider include:

- personnel—the time and/or salary and benefits for program coordinator(s)
- screening
- specialized, on-the-job training

- workspace requirements
- supplies
- equipment
- recognition

Funding for Fire Corps programs can come from many different places.

- Explore federal funding opportunities at [www.grants.gov](http://www.grants.gov), a centralized location for federal agencies to post discretionary funding opportunities and grant seekers to find and apply for them. You should also search for the Assistance to Firefighters Grant program at [www.fema.gov](http://www.fema.gov) as Fire Corps activities may be eligible for assistance.
- Local businesses are also a great resource to approach about donating to your department for Fire Corps. They may also provide in-kind services or donations, ranging from a gift certificate for your Fire Corps member of the month, to equipment needed to complete critical tasks.
- In addition to grants and direct donations, many fire/EMS departments have partnered with an existing local nonprofit association or have been involved in creating an association that can raise funds and secure nonprofit status. Local branches of civic groups and service organizations may be willing to provide support.

You may also consider filing for tax-exempt status for your Fire Corps program. While several types of tax-exempt status exist under the Internal Revenue Code, filing under Section 501(c)(3) is the most common and will work well for the needs of your Fire Corps program. There are several benefits your Fire Corps program can enjoy if 501(c)(3) status is obtained. Your program could become eligible for both public and private funds and grants, and individual donors can claim personal federal income tax deductions, which may create an incentive to donate.

There are several financial benefits as well. As a tax-exempt organization, your Fire Corps program may become eligible for state and federal exemptions from payment of corporate income, sales, and property taxes. Additionally, the organization may enjoy lower postal rates on third-class bulk mailing, less expensive advertising rates in publications, and discounted space from some Internet service providers. Free radio and public service announcements are often provided by the local media, which would be a great resource for Fire Corps to reach and educate the community.

Some legal work is required to obtain 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status for your Fire Corps program. [Click here](#) for more information. Please note – Fire Corps programs with tax-exempt status should still be considered an entity of the fire department and operate under its administration and guidance.

### **Next Steps**

Once you have defined ways that members of the public can support you and have solicited their participation, the real work begins. Now you must manage those that offer to help, make them a part of your team, and assess your program's success. Check out the [Fire Corps Recruitment and Retention Guide](#) and [Fire Corps Volunteer Recruitment Ideas](#) to learn more.